Beat: Technology

Light, mobile and powerful, will Stryker-type brigades make a comeback?

Lessons learned from Ukraine

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USPA NEWS - Like all major conflicts, the war in Ukraine has provided an opportunity to take a critical look at the lessons learned from previous operational engagements, and even at long-term assumptions that have become established norms. Given the casualties suffered on both sides, highly digitalised, mobile, agile medium forces combining all the most 'disruptive' capabilities seem to offer considerable potential for future warfare.

Back in 2003, the US army perceived a veritable gap between its light and heavy forces. The former were easy to deploy rapidly, but lacked the strength in depth to remain operational for an extended period, whereas the latter had immense firepower, but their deployment often took a long time. To tackle this issue, General Eric Shineski, the Army Chief of Staff, began the process of establishing medium-weight brigade combat teams that were light enough to deploy anywhere in the world in just 4 days: these became known as Stryker brigades. The early lessons of the war in Ukraine suggest that this type of force could be considered an optimal solution for modern, high-intensity conflicts.

An axiom under the spotlight

Established norms surrounding deployment in foreign theatres have been upended somewhat since the war broke out in Ukraine in late February 2022. Up until just a few months ago, expeditionary operations in low to medium intensity theatres of operation rehired light to medium, mobile forces rapidly deployable from anywhere in the world. Medium to high intensity operations, whether at home or abroad, require heavy, tracked armoured forces, with a complex system of deployment, requiring a global, strategic military infrastructure. This explains the United States' strategy of "pre-positioning" army stocks and logistical equipment near potential theatres of war.

What the war in Ukraine has showed us is that even in high intensity conflicts, heavy armoured columns are vulnerable to attacks well behind the frontlines by mobile, agile units capable of highly accurate stealth attacks using highly lethal weapons, often preceded by the use of drones for battlefield intelligence or even tactical strikes. The defeat of the Russian forces around Kyiv at the beginning of the conflict highlighted the vulnerability of these traditional armoured columns, proving that heavy armour is definitely as vulnerable as medium armour to a consistent combination of armed drones, anti-tank missiles, portable anti-aircraft missiles and loitering munitions.

The Ukraine war has turned into a drawn-out, high intensity conflict that shows no sign of ending anytime in the near future. As such, with the first line of Ukrainian defence beginning to crack in the Donbas, the fate of the war will depend on the ability of second line of defence to engage the Russians across a vast frontline and execute decisive counterattacks. As NATO, which is unofficially waging war in Ukraine, is currently experimenting, the success of this phase depends on the ability to get a large mass of appropriate forces to the right place at the right time, and therefore on the efficiency of the between what is deployed, the equipment, and the means of transport (aircrafts, trains) or, just as importantly, the state of the infrastructure., ie roads and bridges. Large, heavy armoured vehicles or units can cause a logistical nightmare, and, here again, are definitely much less practical than medium force systems.

Digital integration of medium forces

The above-mentioned observations tend to therefore support the use of 'medium' forces, which offer a compromise that could constitute an optimum in the conditions we have just described: lightness allowing for strategic battlefield mobility, and tactical mobility that contributes to stealth and protection, multiple firepower that is sufficient to destroy the heaviest adversaries. Acting as the glue holding this strategic machine together is its general integration into a digital network that helps optimise reactivity to threats and highlights tactical opportunities, while constituting an ipso facto element of global protection. This digital integration is observable at all levels: fire support, combat troops, intelligence, logistics, command…

This very modern approach to dynamic combat situations is favoured by two of the most experienced Western countries in terms of recent operations, albeit on different quantitative scales: the US army and the French army. The former developed the concept of mobile armoured-infantry (SBCT - Stryker) brigades back in 2003, (although decried for a while, notably for questions of vulnerability to IEDs in a COIN environment), which are seemingly regaining some interest at NATO, who see the logic of using SBCTs to reinforce its eastern flank, especially at a time when fuel is becoming scarce and expensive.

France, on the other hand, has been preparing for high-intensity warfare by developing its Scorpion brigades, the world's most advanced natively digitised joint forces units. These units have the advantage of being able to build upon recent combat experience in theatres such as Iraq, Afghanistan or the Sahel, notably by introducing brand new light-armoured vehicles like the EBRC Jaguar or the Griffon. Moreover, these units are perfectly designed to integrate high mobility, high firepower artillery pieces with proven combat experience, most notable the CAESAR 155mm self-propelled howitzer, which has a proven track record in Iraq, Afghanistan and most recently Ukraine.

A decisive fire support to medium forces

Symbolic of this convergence in the conception of current and future engagements, the US has been interested in the CAESAR for at least two years to provide fire support for its Stryker-type medium units. The gun's combat-proven track record led it to join a list of potential 155mm self-propelled howitzers being considered by the US army back in 2020. This firm interest in the gun, produced by French firm Nexter, was born out of the successful use of the gun in tandem with US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq, and of the recent adaptation of US army to the above-mentioned concept of modern, mobile combat.

In fact, the CAESAR symbolises what we are describing here. With its 17.7 tonnes and its 6x6 or 8x8 chassis, it combines strategic and tactical mobility, much more than its tracked counterparts such as the PZh 2000 (55.8 tonnes), or even the M109 (27.5 tonnes), which explains why it was quickly deployed against the Russian army.

With its 52-calibre barrel, and its 155mm/52 caliber shells that can be fired up to 40 km, (these include all NATO-standard ammunition, as well as smart ammunition like the BONUS anti-tank shells that are already used by the U.S. Army, or the the M982 Excalibur ammunition), it has a range and accuracy that earned it a high reputation during the recapture of Mosul in Iraq. The canon's accuracy means it is perfectly adapted to Stryker-style combat tactics that include integrated, digitised warfare using drones for pinpoint targeting. The gun's ability to move into position, fire, and move away before the enemy can return fire protects it and its unit from destruction.

The war in Ukraine has certainly presented an opportunity for military strategists to rethink certain military norms that have since been thrown up in the air by the successes of modern technologies in the battlefield, notably drones and the digitised network that provides live tactical information to allow for highly precise strikes on key military targets. The vulnerability of heavy armoured columns has also underlined the need for medium-sized mobile armoured units capable to agile displacements in order to avoid destruction. Medium Land forces might just be the bulk of the answer.

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Harris

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UPA United Press Agency LTD
483 Green Lanes
UK, London N13NV 4BS
contact (at) unitedpressagency.com
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